

Judith Francis Zeitlin. *Cultural Politics in Colonial Tehuantepec: Community and State among the Isthmus Zapotec, 1500-1750.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. xix + 323 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-3388-5.



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"Bold like the climate of the land." Such was the description of the natives of Tehuantepec--the Isthmus Zapotec--penned in 1660 by the bishop of Oaxaca, Alonso de Cuevas Dávalos. It is a description which anticipates the longevity of cultural resistance of the Isthmus Zapotec, and which archaeologist Judith Francis Zeitlin interrogates in this engaging and insightful study. Zeitlin focuses on cultural change and adaptation set in motion by the Spanish invasion of Mexico and the collapse of the Isthmus Zapotec conquest state. Her central objective is to "solve the puzzle of how these fiercely independent people have managed to perpetuate a distinctive ethnic identity in the context of an ongoing historical confrontation with nonnative society" (p. xi).

Zeitlin uses an impressive range of data which combines archival research (legal and census records, official correspondence, dictionaries, catechisms, sermons, painted manuscripts, ancestor tales, among others) and archaeological evidence (architecture, settlement patterns, pottery, stone, and metal artifacts), and demonstrates a healthy theoretical eclecticism (Pierre Bourdieu,

Michel Foucault, Eric J. Hobsbawn, James C. Scott, E. P. Thompson and Victor Turner). The author identifies three phases of cultural change and adaptation experienced by the Isthmus Zapotecs between 1521 and 1750: 1) 1521-1562--the imposition of Spanish rule and initial adjustments by the Isthmus Zapotec; 2) 1563-1660--the consolidation of Spanish rule and the political, economic, and religious structures that facilitated such rule; 3) 1660-1750--the maturation of Spanish colonial governance and economy and its influence on the cultural and political identity of the Isthmus Zapotec communities.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an important reconstruction and analysis of the prehispanic Zapotec conquest state of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico and of the political relationships established between kings and conquered communities. Key in this analysis is Zeitlin's concern with the importance of reconstructing indigenous historical memory and understandings of political authority and legitimacy that become a benchmark for her assessments of change and continuity in indigenous values and practices. Zeitlin uses the inva-

sion and conquest of the Isthmus by the Zapotec to examine the sources of political legitimacy of kings and the characteristics of the city-state's political organization with its vertical (social classes with distinctive privileges, obligations, and powers) and horizontal (*barrios* and subordinate communities) divisions of the population.

Chapter 3 traces the political and religious changes in the province between 1521 and 1562 which included the definitive destruction of the prehispanic Zapotec state's political autonomy, the death of the last pre-Columbian ruler of Tehuantepec, Don Juan Cortés, in 1562, and the early evangelization campaigns of the Dominicans in the region. Chapter 4 focuses on the adjustments of the Isthmus Zapotec to the economic demands of the Spanish and changes in the regional political economy. New introductions included ranching and the Spanish *repartimiento* system (coerced production of and/or purchase of goods) administered by local Spanish bureaucrats and imposed on the indigenous communities. But, even in the face of the introduction of abusive practices such as the *repartimiento* and devastating population decline, Zeitlin contends that "most Isthmus communities approached the midpoint of the colonial period physically intact and economically adjusted to their transformed landscape" (p. 164). This is a particularly compelling chapter and highlights the insights, however incomplete they may be, that "postprocessual" archaeology can yield.^[1] The material evidence provided by archaeological data, Zeitlin argues, demonstrates indigenous accommodations to Hispanic cultural patterns and suggests a widespread demand for European household items. Zeitlin draws inferences about the values placed on new material commodities by the Isthmus Zapotec. She argues, for example, that indigenous participation in ranching had a greater significance for the reinforcement of community relationships than it did for the production of profits, and points to "an incipient democratization of native society as luxury goods like imported pottery lost the sumptu-

ary restrictions they held in pre-Columbian times" (p. 166).

Chapters 5 and 6 shift focus from adaptation and adjustment to resistance and rebellion among the Isthmus Zapotec from the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries. Zeitlin reassesses the origins and objectives of such conflict. She also reflects on broader questions about the nature and limits of Spanish political hegemony, and of the indigenous people's expectations of colonial rule and of their community-based political autonomy. Major sources of tension included disputes over land and land boundaries, an increasingly abusive *repartimiento* system, factionalism within indigenous communities, and Spanish interference in indigenous community elections and in traditional Zapotec regional trade networks. Zeitlin analyses three case studies: the 1660 rebellion of Tehuantepec (chapter 5), and community conflict in 1715-1716 and 1719-1721 (chapter 6). Mass revolt resulted in 1660 and 1715-16 but not in the 1719-1721 conflict. Zeitlin observes that a major variable, which may partly explain the different trajectories of conflict, derives from how indigenous communities perceived the presence and operation of Spanish justice on their behalf (or lack thereof).

Chapter 7 provides a sustained discussion of a central theme that weaves throughout the entire study, the resilience and relevance of the Zapotec kings' traditional authority to indigenous community politics and transformations in indigenous leadership. Zeitlin links this to a broader discussion of royal genealogy, ethnicity, and political legitimacy in colonial Tehuantepec and how historical memory has influenced (and influences) community identity and autonomy among the Isthmus Zapotec. Chapter 8 assesses the "trajectory of colonial change" among the Zapotec.

Zeitlin draws several major conclusions about the Isthmus Zapotecs' adjustment to Spanish colonial rule. First, both local native politics and religious practices illustrate the limits of Spanish

colonial hegemony and of the Spanish Catholic Church's evangelizing mission. In the case of the former, the author emphasizes how political conflict not only illuminates indigenous people's dissatisfaction with Spanish colonial administration but also with local Indian governance when they failed to protect community interests. The author observes, however, that such conflict reveals the resilience of a prehispanic symbol of political authority, royal blood. Even with the adoption of Spanish local government institutions (*cabildos* or town councils) by indigenous communities, "the people of Tehuantepec continued to invest these offices with political meanings based on indigenous concepts of authority and legitimacy quite apart from the colonial state's intentions" (p. 193). Similarly, in response to the Dominicans' efforts to convert the Isthmus Zapotec, while the adoption of patron saints, maintenance of local churches, and participation in religious celebrations contributed to the social solidarity of Zapotec communities, the meanings they imparted from such celebrations differed from orthodox Catholic doctrine. In so doing, the Zapotec preserved and gave sustenance to their supernatural spirits and sacred landscapes only dimly perceived, if at all, by the Dominicans. Second, although the principle of royal inheritance retained some political influence among the Isthmus Zapotec throughout the period under study, influence over community politics shifted from traditional control by the native aristocracy to that of *barrio* leaders. Third, Zeitlin emphasizes the vibrancy and political significance of historical memory for the Isthmus Zapotec and the preservation of their traditions: "Tehuantepec's geographic situation and resulting economic patterns may help explain the region's estrangement from the national agenda, but it is the culture of resistance that historical memory fostered among successive generations of Isthmus Zapotecs that underlies people's readiness for political confrontation" (p. 261). Finally, Zeitlin discusses how the transformations experienced by the Isthmus Zapotec under Spanish rule resemble

patterns identified elsewhere in colonial Mesoamerica, but she also identifies what was distinctive about them. If, for example, the Isthmus Zapotecs' adaptation of the new *cabildo* form of government, "to meet traditional organizational principles ... exhibited patterns amply documented elsewhere in colonial Mesoamerica," they differed in the specifics. The Isthmus Zapotec based their organization "on a more centralized kingly authority prevailing in pre-Columbian times than in many of the Nahua communities" and experienced "a greater erosion of aristocratic political power under Spanish rule than was the case among the Yucatec Maya" (p. 256).

While it is clear where the author's sympathies lie, and there is much in her discussion that reinforces a conventional understanding of the oppressiveness of Spanish colonial rule, she also provides a nuanced analysis that illuminates the ambiguities and ambivalences of colonialism. Abusive magistrates and self-serving corrupt viceroys rub shoulders with sympathetic Spanish officials and clergy, and "caciques, cultural brokers, ranchers and tradesmen who had dealings with natives came to a working understanding of these cultural differences in a way that the more isolated members of their own societies did not" (p. 202).

Zeitlin's study is a major contribution to the ethnohistorical literature on colonial Mesoamerica. It joins a distinguished corpus of works that have transformed our understanding of indigenous responses to Spanish colonial rule over the past couple of decades. It is representative of a growing scholarship by historical archaeologists of Mesoamerica that undoubtedly will provide a vital and energizing complement to the innovative scholarship of the "New Philology" pioneered by James Lockhart.^[2] The bedrock of this scholarship—indigenous-language documents—proved elusive for Zeitlin as no corpus of early colonial Zapotec texts from Tehuantepec has yet been discovered "that might provide the heterogeneous

internal perspective on Isthmus community life advanced by Lockhart and his students for many regions of New Spain" (p. 120).

One of the most powerful contributions of this study is the author's reflections on material culture and archaeological evidence. While not uncritical by any means about its limitations, Zeitlin confidently asserts that "[a]rchaeological garbage is much more democratic and potentially more representative, accruing from all social sectors and providing direct testimony as to what did happen, rather than what powerful individuals would like to represent as happening" (p. 155). Although she underestimates how historians have traditionally "read against the grain" to compensate for such biases, Zeitlin nevertheless forces readers to rethink the problems raised by different types of sources and their fragmentary nature, be they court petitions or pottery shards.

Two observations (rather than criticisms) are in order. While Zeitlin is to be congratulated in her choice of period (the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth century)--which is only now beginning to attract serious attention from social and cultural historians of colonial Mexico--the rationale for stopping prior to the period of major reform initiated by the Spanish Bourbon monarchy in the 1750s and subsequent decades is not entirely clear. This leaves the reader to question what, in fact, the ramifications for the Isthmus Zapotec of an increasingly intrusive and aggressive colonial state may have been? The second observation concerns the minimal attention paid to gender and how gender roles and practices among the Isthmus Zapotec changed under Spanish rule. Given a growing sophisticated literature on the impact of Spanish colonialism on prehispanic gender roles and values in indigenous communities, some discussion of this issue would have been welcome.[3] Neither of these observations, however, detracts from the overall importance of Zeitlin's work. This is a first-rate study which merits attention from anyone interested in

how colonialism shapes, and is shaped by, indigenous peoples under its rule.

Notes

[1]. Zeitlin defines this as "concerned with determining the meaning behind material culture, and [to] scrutinize the archaeological record for patterns in the manufacture, use, and disposal of goods that might reveal their specific cultural significance" (p. 166). Also see Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce eds., *Mesoamerican Archaeology. Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

[2]. See James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992) and for a useful overview of the New Philology, see Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History," *Latin American Research Review* 38.1 (2003): pp. 113-133. For a good discussion of method and research directions in historical archaeology in colonial Mexico, see William B. Taylor, "Many Historiographical Mexicos," *History Compass* 3 (July 2005), accessible at www.history-compass.com.

[3]. See for example, Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Karen Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); and Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: a History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2005).

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